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DOI:

[10.1080/0950236X.2016.1122261](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1122261)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Allfrey, F. L., & Brooks, F. A. (2015). A Gift for the Illuminated Sphere. *TEXTUAL PRACTICE*, 30(1), 15-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1122261>

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A Creative Response to Modernism: 'A Gift for the Illuminated Sphere'
Francesca Allfrey and Francesca Brooks, King's College London

In her 1938 monograph on Picasso, Gertrude Stein described the experience of seeing the earth from an airplane:

I saw there on earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves, I saw the simple solutions of Braque, I saw the wandering lines of Masson, yes I saw and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary, he understands what is contemporary when the contemporaries do not yet know it.¹

Just as the de-familiarising effects of Stein's aerial view gave her new perspective on abstraction, 'A Gift for the Illuminated Sphere' – a book curated and produced in response to The Whitechapel Gallery exhibition 'Adventures in the Black Square: Abstract Art & Society 1915-2015' – is designed to push the viewer towards a new mode of seeing. The juxtaposition of images from medieval manuscript illumination and abstract art bring about a realisation that medieval art is as contemporary as the radical forms of abstraction conceived in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries. As Deborah Levy said of the book, it 'whips the rug from under modernity's feet and destabilises it all over again.'

At the invitation of writer-in-residence at The Whitechapel, Caroline Bergvall, we were asked to respond as medievalists to 'Adventures in the Black Square.' This was a strange kind of thought-experiment that required us to see the abstract through the eyes of the medieval, but our response came directly from our research practice: both our PhD projects explore the resonances of the medieval in modern and contemporary arts.

At the time of putting the book together, we were both involved in creative projects alongside our scholarly work as medievalists – undertaking an arts practice course, and editing *The Still Point*, a journal for the exploration of research in experimental forms and media. We had begun to explore what happens when we embrace subjectivity and playfulness, and acknowledge the role of imagination in experiences that provoke an emotional as well as an intellectual response.

The 'Gift for the Illuminated Sphere,' is more interested in asking questions than providing answers. The process of making the book was a research method rather than an end-product. It perpetuates as well as challenges the Modernist project: asking how subjective engagement with the visual and textual functions, and relishing in the destabilising of signs – political, aesthetic, and formal – across time.

The book sets out 'to stage,' as Alexander Nagel does in *Medieval Modern*, 'a series of collisions between medieval and modern materials, with no other purpose than to have one work open up new critical insights into the other.'² Nagel goes on to explain that: 'In these encounters, moments of medieval art leave their time to speak to the present. [...] The modern works, too, are taken out of their time, falling out of mere historical sequence. Their radicality consists in being more than something

¹ *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1984) p.50.

² *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012) p.22.

new.’³ Any scholar working with the distant past is used to examining abstraction in its realest sense, so much is often missing or lost. Yet what has been changed by time is often of just as much interest as what remains untouched. We’ve tried to explore what happens when texts and images, belonging to very different times, are made to speak across new spaces: in a way that is comparable to how words and images appear and reappear in printed materials, visual art, museum displays, or online.

Deborah Levy called the book a ‘visual conversation between an ancient language and a modern language.’ Whilst it’s perhaps a trap (one that literary scholars so often indulge in) to imagine subjects of the past as being active participants in a conversation, it is perhaps over-serious to deny that a ‘conversation’ – a to-ing and fro-ing, a sense of dialogue – is the nearest description for the *feeling* that is evoked when we make connections across time.

A digital copy can be seen at:
http://issuu.com/francheskyia/docs/gift_for_the_illuminated_sphere.

³ *Medieval Modern* (2012) p.23.